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When Couples Become Parents: The Creation of Gender in the Transition to Parenthood

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When Couples Become Parents: The Creation of Gender in the Transition to Parenthood. Bonnie Fox. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2009. 334 pp. ISBN 0802091849. \$35.00 paper.

Couples in crisis, increasing gender differentiation, inconsistent and deficient social policies—these are just some of the reasons the transition to parenthood has interested scholars for decades. In *When Couples Become Parents*, Bonnie Fox brings these aspects together for an in-depth examination of the lives of new parents. Fox takes the concept of social reproduction (Laslett & Brenner, 1989) as her theoretical starting point and builds the book around the assumption that examining people's material and social resources is essential to understanding their experiences. Her largely structural approach provides an important counterbalance to much of the recent research on the transition to parenthood, which has focused more on ideological factors. Although the title of the book contends that it will describe "the creation of gender in the transition to parenthood," Fox's conclusions are actually more complex. She writes, "The stories of these couples should also undermine any assumption that parenthood inevitably reproduces gender differences, divisions, or inequalities in the lives of heterosexual couples" (p. 291). Her attention to the diversity of responses and patterns of her sample of largely homogenous couples to the challenges inherent in the transition to parenthood is one of the book's greatest strengths.

Fox dealt with the multiple moving pieces intrinsic to her topic by conducting longitudinal, in-depth interviews with both male and female partners in 40 heterosexual Canadian couples over the course of a year. By interviewing new mothers and fathers separately, she was able to identify the distinctive narratives that a single relationship often contains (Bernard, 1972) and to capture how each individual constructed his or her new parental identity through interaction with his or her partner. She puts to good use the diversity of socioeconomic class among her couples in her analysis, where she is careful to examine the impact of each couple's constellation of resources on their initial parental experiences (Garey, 1999). The Canadian context is also an important element of this research, as she demonstrates how the couples are affected in significant ways by the amount of job leave and other family benefits available to each parent. The research, conducted in the 1990s, provides a useful point of comparison for both current Canadian policies (which are more generous) and U.S. policies (which are much less so), although how these would compare is not directly addressed.

Fox's use of the concept of economy of care is one of the book's contributions. Building on Hochschild's (1989) concept of the economy of gratitude, Fox does a superb job of tracing the changing amount and types of care that men and women provide for each other throughout this transitional period. Her use of the concept helps make sense of the different reactions of new fathers to their wives' intense focus on the new baby. She finds that those couples who initially had a "traditional" economy of care, in which the woman does more to care for the husband than he does for her, had more problems than other couples during the first year. These husbands tend to view the time that the woman spent caring for the baby as taking away from (or displacing) the attention that usually went to them. In contrast, among those couples who had relationships characterized by reciprocity of care, the time the woman (or man) put toward caring for the baby was also experienced as care given to each other. Focusing on the couple's economy of care also provides interesting insights into related topics. For example, Fox argues that a significant amount of the behaviors that scholars have labeled "gatekeeping" may actually be wives' attempts to care for their husbands by protecting them from the additional stress of infant care.

When Couples Become Parents has nine chapters, including seven substantive chapters that cover every stage in the transition to parenthood. In Chapter 2—the first substantive chapter—Fox examines the childbirth experiences of her female participants and argues that their positive or negative evaluation is often tied to the level of social support around them rather than to their perspectives or experiences with the medicalization of childbirth. In Chapter 3, she analyzes the postpartum period and the problems many women experience during that time. Although pointing to the problems caused by the privatization of motherhood (e.g., lack of preparation, overwhelming maternal responsibility, isolation) is hardly novel, Fox argues that the types of both informal and formal social support that new mothers receive is the critical piece in their postpartum experiences—the details of which have not received enough attention from scholars.

In Chapter 4, Fox explores the mothering and fathering practices of new parents over the first year. Although her discussion of why some mothers develop more intensive mothering practices is quite interesting, her definition of intensive mothering practices seems problematic in places. Fox appears to assume that the only way in which women try to live up to intensive mothering ideologies is through practices usually associated with attachment parenting (e.g., cosleeping, baby wearing, extended breast-feeding), leaving out other important dimensions of the construct. A strength of the chapter is her discussion of how mothers

work to construct their partners as active fathers through a variety of both subtle and overt techniques. She successfully supports her argument that the amount and type of baby care that a new dad performs during the early months usually has more to do with his relationship with his wife than with his motivations for becoming a father. This leads to additional intriguing questions about whether a reduction in their partner's domestic work accompanies men's involvement in infant care.

Chapters 5 and 6 describe the division of baby care and housework among couples. Keeping to the overarching themes of the book, Fox describes the ways in which material and personal resources affected the division of labor, as well as the impact of the type of economy of care. She concludes that, because of the combination of strong material and cultural forces, nearly all the couples she studied were pushed toward greater gender differentiation during the transition to parenthood. In particular, women generally felt a much greater sense of overarching responsibility toward the baby and did more of the physical baby care, as well as more thinking about the baby (Walzer, 1998). Although this finding is not new, the fact that this conclusion continues to emerge at a time when men's and women's lives are becoming more symmetrical is an important finding. These chapters are followed by the final two substantive chapters, in which Fox looks at the common problems that new mothers and fathers experience individually over the course of the first year and at how the couple's relationship was affected by parenthood.

Although the author's attention to detailed descriptions of every stage in the transition to parenthood preclude the book from being a quick read, scholars interested in parenthood and gender will appreciate the strong methodology, nuanced analysis, and theoretical contributions of the study. Fox's analysis of how the privatization of care affects new parents and her emphasis on a more complete understanding of social support during this transition should speak to those interested in family policy revisions. In addition, by highlighting the importance of how career accomplishments and economic resources can shape a couple's negotiation of family responsibilities, Fox illuminates important work-family intersections.

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